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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another week, another weird spell of wintry weather. You would think that not much would surprise me in that regard! At least we haven't been digging out any snow for awhile!

I didn't have much to say this week - y'know, it's really difficult to come up with thought-provoking topics week after week! But, a message I saw on one of my favorite Delphi forums, as well as a number of related articles (reproduced for your reading pleasure this week) got me in a semi-rotten mood.

I'd wager that most, if not all of you, have taken advantage of the opportunities provided by eBay at one time or another - either as a buyer or a seller. Personally, I do a little bit of both. I've purchased all kinds of items on eBay, including a roll top desk! And, I've been a seller for almost a year now. eBay is one helluva 24-hour flea market, and more!

Well, this past week eBay announced some new changes to their fee structure. Listing fees are being reduced, while at the same time, final purchase fees are going up. For sellers of low-priced items (such as mine!), this will really take a bite out of our profits, or increase our losses. What bothered me the most about this announcement was the way in which eBay tried to sugar coat the changes!

We all know that even though there are other venues, no one (yet) can equal the customer base that eBay has. And eBay knows it! While I still routinely search for various specific items, the items that I have for sale have been reduced greatly. It's just too expensive to list items and not have them sell. And I'm just one of many who aren't too happy with these changes. Sure, I'll probably continue to sell, jacking up my prices a bit to help defray the increases. But, I'm sure that many folks will go elsewhere, or just decide to hold live flea markets when the weather is suitable. And now we're back to the weather again!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - "Madden" Game Picks Pats!

Psychotic Bunnies Are Back!
"Chimps" Gets Game Treatment!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

"Madden" Game Picks Patriots To Win Super Bowl

The New England Patriots will beat the New York Giants by a score of 38-30 in the Super Bowl, at least according to the popular "Madden NFL 08" football videogame.

A simulation of this Sunday's championship game run in "Madden" by publisher Electronic Arts Inc showed the Patriots taking an early lead with a pair of touchdowns by running back Laurence Maroney.

The Giants pulled within one point in the third quarter, but a pass from quarterback Tom Brady to receiver Randy Moss helped make the Patriots the first team to record a perfect 19-0 season, EA said in a statement.

EA said "Madden" has picked the Super Bowl winner for five years running.

Psychotic Bunnies Are Back

When the Nintendo Wii console came out in November 2006, "Rayman Raving Rabbids" emerged as its first sleeper hit by weaving entertaining minigames and hilarious slapstick comedy bits and into a cleverly constructed story line.

"Rayman Raving Rabbids 2" ($49.99, Ubisoft) offers more fun and humor, full-motion video scenes and an expansion to four-player action, but it lacks the cohesiveness of its predecessor - especially in single-player mode.

In the original game, the cartoon character Rayman found himself trapped in a Romanesque coliseum, having to win over the growing crowds of psychotic bunnies by performing well in minigames. There was a sense of purpose to the task at hand, and success opened new games for multiplayer mode.

In the sequel, the rabbids invade Earth and Rayman must travel to different cities around the world to stop them. The introductory video is funny, but there's no game path laid out and it's too easy to quickly open up all the minigames - about 50 instead of the nearly 70 offered by the original "Rayman Raving Rabbids."

The good news is the bunnies are just as nuts as ever and there are

plenty of laugh-out-loud moments.

In "Are We There Yet?" a perturbed Rayman sits in the driver’s seat of a station wagon packed with misbehaving juvenile bunnies. Score points by using the Wii remote to slap the ones who are acting up. Hit the wrong ones and you’ll lose points.

"Dial R for Rabbids" throws players in a theater full of bunnies trying to get away with gabbing on their cell phones during a movie showing. Raise the Wii remote up to your ear to talk, quickly drop it down when the usher barges in and raise it up again to earn more points after he leaves.

In "Burgerinni," your character becomes a waiter and must maneuver through the "ristorante" to deliver piled-high burgers to a waiting "Godfather"-like customer. It’s more fun in multiplayer mode, as competing waiters collide to send burger layers, and each other, flying off the sides.

Others minigames are so shallow they seem almost pointless.

In "Timber," you shake your Wii remote to saw the tree branch on which you’re sitting to the ground. That’s it.

"American Football" involves running aimlessly around a football field and avoiding other players while trying to hold onto the ball.

The dancing minigames were favorites of the original title, and each played a key part in advancing to new levels. They were sort of hand controller versions of "Dance Dance Revolution," prompting players to use their Wii remote and drum sticks to keep beat with the dancing bunnies.

"Rayman Raving Rabbids 2" scraps the original dancing games in favor of ones that let players choose one of four musical instruments and play as part of a band. The game overreaches here, and they’re just not as fun as in the original. A simple retooling with new songs would have worked better.

The battle scenes in which players shoot plungers at the crazy meandering bunnies are entertaining, and the sequel trades out the animated backgrounds for full-motion video of such cities as New York and Paris. It’s an interesting blend of real and cartoon, akin to the "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" movie.

"Rayman Raving Rabbids 2" has its moments, but it had a tough act to follow and doesn’t quite meet the high expectations.

Two-and-a-half out of four stars.

"Chimps" Gets Game Treatment From Brash

Brash Entertainment is developing a video game based on the upcoming movie "Space Chimps," from Vanguard Animation and Starz Media.

The "Chimps" game, which has been in development for more than a year, will be available for Microsoft XBox 260, Sony PlayStation 2 and Nintendo’s Wii and DS systems.

Mitch Davis, co-founder, chairman and CEO of Brash Entertainment, said the company had worked closely with the makers of the film, which is being produced by John H. Williams ("Shrek") and Barry Sonnenfeld.

"We were with them from the very beginning on site at the studio in Canada," Davis said. "They shared all the assets, from conceptual art to the music, and they gave a lot of ideas on how the game could extend the story arc of the movie."

Said Vanguard CEO Terry Bootlick: "Starting early with Brash definitely gave us the opportunity to sync up the schedules and collaborate along the way. We've shipped assets on a regular basis to Brash, and they've exposed us to their script, design documents and additional characters they were thinking of creating."

Bootlick said the film is on track to be completed in February. Fox will release it July 18.

"Chimps" follows the adventures of a mischievous circus chimp named Ham, voiced by Andy Samberg, who leads a mission into space to explore a mysterious new planet.

Davis said the "Chimps" game will be on shelves a few weeks before the film's debut, following a formula Brash used successfully with its first title, a game based on the holiday hit "Alvin and the Chipmunks."

Brash was founded in June with the goal of creating content based on theatrical franchises. It has deals in place with Warner Bros, Fox, Universal, Vanguard and Lionsgate.

Crash Scenes In Latest 'Burnout' Are A Gamer's Paradise

The new year gets off to a blazing start with crash fest Burnout Paradise, a raucous racer that kicks the franchise into a higher gear.

The seventh Burnout installment is a sharp turn in the action. Criterion Games takes you down to Paradise City, a sprawling open-world metropolis. Developers liberate players by scrapping the linear campaign and providing the freedom to choose their path.

Paradise City is a driving mecca. Vehicles sparkle in the sunlight as you zoom through busy downtowns and steep mountain passes. The soundtrack, like the vehicles you command, packs a ton of horsepower.

The city is very easy to navigate, thanks to a crisp interface. A small map of Paradise City sits in the lower right corner, and your boost meter on the lower left. Your current street sits at the top middle, while side streets pop up on the left or right.

Of course, Burnout has never been a leisurely drive. Only one rule of the road exists: Create highway carnage. Each stoplight represents a different event. Some are a simple race. Road Rage rewards takedowns of opposing vehicles. In Stunt Run, drivers take daring jumps and stomach-churning spins to rack up as many points as possible.

Each event you win earns a point on your license. When you complete a

certain number of challenges, you'll get a license upgrade. One cool wrinkle is the option to include your picture taken off PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 cameras.

If the hundreds of challenges aren't enough, every street has its own time and crash challenges to master. You can also spend your time scouting the city for shortcuts, billboards and super jumps. After certain events, special cars begin to randomly appear. If you take them out, they're added to a collection that peaks at 75 vehicles. All cars vary based on speed, strength and stunt skills. Each vehicle earns boost based on type. Stronger cars must drive overly aggressive to power their meter.

At the core of Burnout are the spectacular crashes. The cinematic effects turn a violent collision into a mesmerizing display of glass shards and twisted metal. Fresh paint jobs peel away. Bumpers cling to your car. Once the slow-motion effect ends, you'll cringe as your roadster slams into walls or plummets onto a lower highway.

The freeway freedom is astounding, but Criterion's ability to mash the gas pedal non-stop is particularly impressive. Once you start the game, load screens disappear. Menus are relegated to the pause menu. Drivers can whip through gas stations for boost refuels and repair shops without stopping.

Even jumping online is accomplished with little interruption. A click of the direction pad and you enter Freeburn Mode, an online set of challenges numbering in the hundreds. Up to eight can battle for road rule records or other milestones. Options are solid, although a few more online events like Road Rage would have broadened the experience. Another small disappointment is the lack of offline two-player mode.

Those minor speed bumps don't slow Burnout Paradise. The franchise sticks to its roots, yet feels incredibly refreshing. All that's missing is the new car smell.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Microsoft Offers To Buy Yahoo for $44.6 Billion

Microsoft Corp made a bid to buy Yahoo Inc for $44.6 billion in cash and stock, seeking to join forces against Google Inc in what would be the biggest Internet deal since the Time Warner-AOL merger.

In its boldest-ever acquisition move, Microsoft sent a letter to Yahoo's board on Thursday night, offering $31 per share for the Internet media company, a 62 percent premium over its Nasdaq closing stock price that day. The price is still below Yahoo's year-high of $34.08 in late October. Yahoo said on Friday its board will evaluate the offer.

Yahoo shares shot up 45.5 percent to $27.91.

The world's biggest software maker is seeking a joint stand against an ever more powerful Google, whose share of the global Web search market has reached 77 percent, according to Internet audience researcher comScore. Yahoo is second with 16 percent and Microsoft was a distant third with 3.7 percent.

Yahoo would give Microsoft dominance in Web banner ads used by corporate brand advertisers. Yahoo attracts more than 500 million people monthly to a network of sites devoted to news, finance and sports as well as Yahoo Mail, the No. 1 consumer e-mail service.

"Microsoft's wanted to do things that could build up its online business dramatically," said Brendan Barnicle, an analyst at Pacific Crest Securities. "This is going to be a big bet for them. But I also think it's where they see the market going, so they really needed to get there.

"This is more than a shot across the bow at Google, because you put these two guys together who are basically two and three in search and makes them far more relevant," he added.

Yahoo said its board will evaluate the unsolicited bid. Microsoft shares, which have a market capitalization of about $300 billion, fell 5.5 percent to $30.82.

Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer told analysts on a conference call that the deal would transform its money-losing Internet division, which it sees as critical to growth, into a profitable pillar of its business.

"We have been losing money. Our plan here would be to not lose money in the future," Ballmer said.

Ballmer said Microsoft had held discussions with Yahoo "off and on for the last 18 months."

"A year ago, the management team told us it wasn't really the right time to discuss an acquisition," Ballmer said, in an apparent reference to then Chairman and Chief Executive Terry Semel, who was forced out as CEO in June. He resigned as chairman of Yahoo on Thursday, a day ahead of Microsoft's bid.

While speculation of such a tie-up has swirled in the markets for more than a year, critics say Microsoft and Yahoo have very different corporate cultures and many overlapping businesses, from instant messaging to email and advertising, as well as news, travel and finance sites.

"To me, the premium seems exorbitant, for what is a dwindling business. I personally don't see how the synergies of Microsoft-Yahoo is going to take on Google," said Tim Smalls, head of U.S. stock trading at brokerage firm Execution LLC.

Yahoo has been losing market share to Google in the increasingly strategic Web search market, and warned earlier this week that it faced "headwinds" in 2008, forecasting revenue below Wall Street estimates.

Microsoft said the online advertising market is growing rapidly and expected to reach nearly $80 billion by 2010 from over $40 billion in

2007. It added it is "increasingly dominated by one player," referring to Google. Microsoft paid $6 billion last year to buy online advertising services firm aQuantive as a bulwark against Google's growing position.

The software company said it had identified four areas that would generate at least $1 billion in annual synergies for the combined entity.

Microsoft General Counsel Brad Smith acknowledged that rival bidders could emerge, but said any attempt by arch-rival Google to acquire Yahoo would face insurmountable antitrust hurdles.

"Any number of companies might take an interest. There's one company that cannot: That's Google itself. Given its superdominant market share, Google is clearly prevented by antitrust laws from buying Yahoo," the chief lawyer said.

Mark May, analyst at Needham & Co, said that while the price is a premium to Yahoo's recent trading price, it was in line with its average trading value over the last 2 years.

"I would not be surprised to see this bid have to be raised over time," he said. "I think there are companies out there like Comcast and Viacom nd others that still need to address the emergence of online media and haven't. So there are clearly other strategic companies out there."

Under the proposal, Yahoo shareholders can choose to get $31 cash, or 0.9509 of a share of Microsoft common stock. The deal in aggregate must consist of one-half cash and one-half Microsoft common stock, it said.

The Microsoft-Yahoo deal would be the largest in the Internet market since the $182 billion purchase of Time Warner Inc by AOL in 2001, which was seen as the worst merger in recent corporate history, with clashing corporate cultures and many of the promised synergies never materializing.

Hackers Rig Google to Deliver Malware

If last November you googled one of thousands of innocuous and common search terms, such as "Microsoft excel to access" or "how to teach your dogs to fetch," you were in line for an Internet attack that infects PCs with spam senders, password stealers, and other kinds of nasty malware.

Beginning on November 24 and continuing for less than a week, bad guys loaded up more than 40,000 Web pages with malicious software and thousands of common search terms. They then employed an automated network of malware-infected computers - known as a botnet - to link to those sites in blog-comment spam and other places. The mentions elevated the position of the poisoned sites in search results, often to the first page.

The malicious sites had no useful information. Instead, a simple click on a link to such a site in the search results was enough to launch attacks against your PC. If the attack found any of a number of vulnerabilities in a range of programs, it would load.

"This was a massive wave," says Alex Eckelberry, president and CEO of security firm Sunbelt Software.

The attack marks a new level of sophistication, using multiple techniques to raise site visibility in search results and deliver malware to a mass audience.

Sunbelt researcher Adam Thomas happened upon the attack when he ran a search of "netgear ProSafe DD-WRT" for router firmware. His trained eye saw a suspicious-looking result on the first page. More research and digging on other phrases turned up the vast array of attack sites.

None of the sites from this wave, or a smaller follow-up group, appear now on Google, and Eckelberry and other experts believe the search giant has blocked those specific domains. But Google isn't saying what it did to stop this attack, or whether measures are in place to halt a recurrence.

This massive attack had three notable features that point to the sophistication and planning behind it. The first is the culprits' use of botnets to push a dark form of SEO (search-engine optimization), called a "Google bomb," to boost their sites' Google rankings.

"They did an extraordinary job optimizing the search results using the bots," Eckelberry says.

Second, the poisoned sites carried JavaScript code on their pages designed to stop visitors coming via other search engines from being attacked - only visitors who came through a Google search were hit.

"[This trick was a] way of flipping the finger at Google," says Eckelberry. Experts don't know the motive behind directing the attacks at Google users, but online crooks have targeted specific sites and companies in the past when they felt threatened. Google recently launched an online form for reporting a site that Web users believe might contain malware.

Third, the manipulated pages carried code that kept the attack sites from appearing in results if the entered search term included certain expressions that security researchers commonly use. For example, Eckelberry had recently written about using "inurl" and "site," two of the singled-out terms.

Despite Google's steps to eliminate the impact of comment spam on its search result rankings, the use of SEO techniques is growing in the online criminal underground. And bad guys don't employ the trick just to infect people's PCs. WhiteHat Security chief Jeremiah Grossman says that whoever hacked Al Gore's Web site recently added a link that could be seen only in the site's source code.

The link, which pointed to an online pharmacy site, was designed to give the drug site more relevance. Grossman says that, according to underground contacts, the top result for "buy Viagra online" is worth about $50,000 a month.

Though this attack was crafty and effective, security experts say there's no need to stop using Google, as long as you take some precautions. Most important: Keep your software patched and up-to-date. The attack sites used a programming kit called the "404 exploit framework," which hits known software vulnerabilities, says Roger Thompson, president of security software maker Exploit Prevention Labs. You can close most of the targeted holes by enabling the automatic-update features for Microsoft

Windows, Mozilla Firefox, Apple QuickTime, and other critical software, but you should also update to the latest version of WinZip, a targeted program that doesn't have an auto-update feature.

And don't let your guard down just because your software is current. Attack sites will often employ social-engineering tricks when they can't worm into your PC through software holes. On its blog, Sunbelt provides an image of a common attack pop-up that attempts to trick you into installing a fake video codec that then tries to exploit a vulnerable PC. Your sharp eye can also catch many of these bogus results before you click. Watch for seemingly garbled text such as "vpn passthrough sting maphack light Motorola" in the text snippet shown for each search result. If the listing is for an oddly named page such as "leuwusxrijke.cn/769.html," it could very well be a land mine.

Free downloads such as McAfee's SiteAdvisor and Exploit Prevention Labs' LinkScanner Lite identify potentially dangerous search results with small icons. And the leading commercial security software suites offer browser protection. Keep a close eye on what you click on, too, and you'll keep search paranoia at bay, as Eckelberry has. "I'm a Google fanatic," he says. "I haven't stopped using Google because of this."

Threats From Everywhere In 'Cyber Storm'

In the middle of the biggest-ever "Cyber Storm" war game to test the nation's hacker defenses, someone quietly targeted the very computers used to conduct the exercise.

The surprising culprit? The players themselves, the same government and corporate experts responsible for detecting and fending off attacks against vital computer systems, according to hundreds of pages of heavily censored files obtained by The Associated Press. Perplexed organizers sent everyone an urgent e-mail marked "IMPORTANT!" instructing them not to probe or attack the game's control computers.

"Any time you get a group of (information technology) experts together, there's always a desire, 'Let's show them what we can do,'" said George Foresman, a former senior Homeland Security official. "Whether its intent was embarrassment or a prank, we had to temper the enthusiasm of the players."

The exercise was a big deal for all concerned.

The $3 million, invitation-only war game simulated what the U.S. describes as plausible attacks over five days in February 2006 against the technology industry, transportation lines and energy utilities by anti-globalization hackers. The government is organizing a multimillion-dollar "Cyber Storm 2," to take place in early March.

Among the mock disasters confronting officials in the previous exercise: Washington's Metro trains shut down. Seaport computers in New York went dark. Bloggers revealed locations of railcars with hazardous materials. Airport control towers were disrupted in Philadelphia and Chicago. Overseas, a mysterious liquid was found on London's subway.

The list of fictional catastrophes - which also included hundreds of people on "No Fly" lists suddenly arriving at airport ticket counters -

is significant because it suggests what kind of real-world trouble keeps the White House awake at night. Railway switches failed. Planes flew too close to the White House. Water utilities in Los Angeles were compromised.

The Homeland Security Department ran the exercise, with help from the State Department, Pentagon, Justice Department, CIA, National Security Agency and others.

Imagined villains included hackers, bloggers and even reporters. In one scenario, after mock electronic attacks overwhelmed computers at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, an unspecified "major news network" airing reports about the attackers refused to reveal its sources to the government. Other simulated reporters were duped into spreading "believable but misleading" information that confused the public and financial markets, according to the government's documents.

The upcoming "Cyber Storm 2" in March also will simulate electronic attacks against chemical plants and communication lines, and include targets in California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia.

"They point out where your expectations of your capabilities may be overstated," Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told the AP. "They may reveal to you things you haven't thought about. It's a good way of testing that you're going to do the job the way you think you were. It's the difference between doing drills and doing a scrimmage."

The AP obtained the Cyber Storm internal records nearly two years after it requested them under the Freedom of Information Act. The government censored most of the 328 pages it turned over, marked "For Official Use Only," citing rules against disclosing sensitive information. The government is still reviewing hundreds more documents before they can be turned over to the AP.

"Definitely a challenging scenario," said Scott C. Algeier, who runs a cyber-defense group for leading technology companies, the Information Technology Information Sharing and Analysis Center.

For the participants - including government officials from the United States, England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and executives from technology and transportation companies - the mock disasters came fast and furious: hacker break-ins at an airline; stolen commercial software blueprints; problems with satellite navigation systems; trouble with police radios in Montana; school closures in Washington, Miami and New York; computer failures at border checkpoints.

The incidents, designed to tax responders, were divided among categories: computer attacks, physical attacks and psychological operations.

"We want to stress these players," said Jeffrey Wright, the former Cyber Storm director for the Homeland Security Department. "None of the players took 100 percent of the correct, right actions. If they had, we wouldn't have done our job as planners."

How did they do? Reviews were mixed. Companies and governments worked successfully in some cases. But key players didn't understand the role of the premier U.S. organization responsible for fending off major cyber attacks, called the National Cyber Response Coordination Group, and it didn't have enough technical experts. Also, the sheer number of mock attacks complicated defensive efforts.

The little-known Cyber Response group, headed by the departments of Justice and Homeland Security, represents the largest government departments, including law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

The 2006 exercise had no impact on the real Internet. Officials said they were careful to simulate attacks using only isolated computers, working from basement offices at the Secret Service's headquarters in downtown Washington.

Europeans Uneasy On Online Data Safety

Three out of four Europeans are worried about posting their personal information on the Internet.

Franco Frattini, the European Union's top law enforcement official, said Monday that an upcoming poll will show people were concerned about the security of their personal data and wondering what they could do to protect it.

"It is our intention to fully analyze and understand the feedback we have been given by Europe's citizens in this survey," said Frattini, the EU's Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner.

Europeans' should be "a salutary lesson" for all those who handle personal data, he said. Regulators from the EU's 27 nations are preparing a report on whether the privacy policies of Internet search engines operated by Google Inc., Yahoo Inc., Microsoft Corp. and others comply with EU privacy law.

Frattini did not reveal the number of people surveyed or the poll's margin of error, but Eurobarometer surveys like this one usually are based on interviews with several thousand people across the EU.

While three in four people worry about the safety of posting personal data, more than half said they trusted medical services, financial institutions, employers, police, social security, tax authorities and local government to handle their data.

Frattini said people did understand the need to use private data to hunt down terror suspects and fight crime with almost 75 percent agreeing to phone tapping in certain circumstances and almost 70 percent to monitoring of their credit card use.

"Only 15 percent of respondents were against the monitoring of air traveler data in all cases," he said.

The British government was forced to apologize in November when it managed to lose sensitive details on some 25 million people who claim child benefit payments.

And banking transfer operator SWIFT drew criticism from EU data protection officers and lawmakers last year for transferring bank data to the U.S. Treasury under a secret deal that did not give enough guarantees that the information would be kept safe.

Japan Lacks Virus Laws

Police investigating a man for allegedly spreading a computer virus had to arrest him on a copyright infringement charge because Japan lacks laws against malicious computer programs, a police officer said Friday.

Masato Nakatsuji, 24, a graduate student at Osaka Electro-Communication University, is suspected of illegally copying and distributing over the Internet an image from the Japanese animation film "Clannad" showing a woman walking amid falling cherry blossoms.

But Nakatsuji also allegedly embedded the image in the "Harada virus," one of Japan’s "Big Three" viruses, a Kyoto police officer said on the customary condition of anonymity.

Police said it was the first arrest in Japan involving making or spreading viruses.

Although computer viruses have wreaked havoc around the world for more than two decades, Japan has been slow to pass legislation to crack down on people who make and spread the potentially destructive programs.

In the latest case, police considered other charges, including damage to property and obstructing business, before deciding that copyright violation charges would hold up best in court, the officer said.

Nakatsuji, who is not suspected of creating the virus, was in police custody and not immediately available for comment. Police said he isn’t contesting the charges.

Downloading the Harada virus with the animated image destroyed data and spread on the Internet information stored in computers hit by the virus, according to police.

The virus was also spread through an illegal Japanese file-sharing software program called Winny. The extent of the damage has not yet been disclosed, the Kyoto officer said.

Koji Namikoshi, spokesman for the university where Nakatsuji was researching laser technology, said the university is strengthening instruction on ethical uses of the Internet.

"But the only illegality is copyright," he said. "Something is wrong."

The maximum punishment for copyright infringement is 10 years in prison and fines of 10 million yen, or $93,000.

Three Plead Guilty In Nigerian Spam Scheme

Three people have pleaded guilty to charges related to spam e-mail that promised U.S. victims millions of dollars from an estate and a lottery, the U.S. Department of Justice announced Wednesday.

In one scenario, the defendants sent e-mails purporting to be from an individual suffering from terminal throat cancer who needed assistance

distributing approximately $55 million to charity, the DOJ said.

The three defendants, two from Nigeria and one from Senegal, sent spam e-mail to thousands of potential victims, in which they falsely claimed to control millions of dollars located abroad, the DOJ said in a press release. The fraud victims lost $1.2 million by giving the defendants advance fees, the DOJ said.

Pleading guilty in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York were Nnamdi Chizuba Anisiobi, whose aliases include Yellowman, Abdul Rahman, Michael Anderson, Edmund Walter, Nancy White, Jiggaman, and Namo, age 31, of Nigeria; Anthony Friday Ehis, also known as John J. Smith, Toni N. Amokwu, and Mr. T, age 34, of Senegal; and Kesandu Egwuonwu, also known as KeKe, Joey Martin Maxwell, David Mark, and Helmut Schkinger, age 35, of Nigeria.

Anisiobi pled guilty to one count of conspiracy, eight counts of wire fraud, and one count of mail fraud. Ehis pled guilty to one count of conspiracy and five counts of wire fraud. Egwuonwu pled guilty to one count of conspiracy, three counts of wire fraud, and one count of mail fraud.

The maximum penalty for mail and wire fraud is 20 years in prison. The conspiracy charge carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

A fourth defendant, Lenn Nwokeafor, fled to Nigeria and was subsequently arrested by the Nigerian Economic & Financial Crimes Commission on July 27, 2006. He is being held by the Nigerian authorities pending extradition to the United States, the DOJ said.

In the throat cancer scheme, the defendants offered to give a 20 percent commission to the victim, or a charity of his or her choice, in exchange for the victim’s help. The defendants would send a variety of fraudulent documents, including a "letter of authority" or a "certificate of deposit," making it appear that the promised funds were available, as well as pictures of an individual claiming to suffer from throat cancer, the DOJ said.

Defendant Anisiobi allegedly telephoned victims, disguising his voice to give the impression that he was suffering from throat cancer.

After obtaining their victims’ trust, the defendants asked them to wire-transfer payment for a variety of advance fees for legal representation, taxes, and additional documentation. The victims then received nothing back, the DOJ said.

In some cases, if the victims said they could not afford to pay the advance fees, the defendants would send them counterfeit checks, supposedly from a cancer patient, to cover those fees. Many victims deposited the checks and then drew on them to wire-transfer the advance fees. When the checks did not clear, the victims suffered substantial losses, the DOJ said.

"Online scam artists should be on notice that we will continue to work closely with our international partners to ensure that there are no safe geographic boundaries for committing these crimes," Assistant Attorney General Alice Fisher of the DOJ’s Criminal Division said in a statement.

The investigation was initiated by Dutch law enforcement authorities, who notified the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, which opened its own

investigation. The three who pled guilty were arrested in Amsterdam on Feb. 21, 2006.

FTC Settles With Spammer

An online advertiser that drove traffic to its Web sites by sending out spam with misleading subject lines has agreed to settle a U.S. Federal Communications Commission complaint charging that it failed to tell consumers they had to spend money to receive so-called free products, the FTC announced Wednesday.

The settlement requires Member Source Media to disclose the costs and obligations associated with the advertised products and services, and bars the company from sending e-mail that violates the CAN-SPAM Act, which regulates the sending of unsolicited e-mail. The company must also pay US$200,000 in civil penalties, according to the settlement approved Wednesday in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California.

Member Source Media - doing business as ConsumerGain.com, PremiumPerks.com, FreeRetailRewards.com, and GreatAmericanGiveaways.com - and the company’s owner, Chris Sommer, used deceptive spam and online advertising to lure customers to its Web sites, the FTC alleged.

The company used e-mail subject lines such as, "Congratulations. You’ve won an iPod Video Player," "Here are 2 free iPod Nanos for You: confirm now," and "Second Attempt: Target Gift Card Inside," the FTC said in a press release. The company’s Web-based ads contained similar offers: "CONGRATULATIONS! You Have Been Chosen To Receive a FREE GATEWAY LAPTOP."

When consumers arrived at Member Source Media’s Web pages, they were led through a series of ads for goods and services from third parties.

To qualify for their "free products," consumers would have to first wade through pages of "optional" offers. Once they navigated those pages, they had to participate in a series of third-party promotions requiring them to do things such as purchase products, subscribe to satellite television service, or apply for multiple credit cards, the FTC said.

Member Source Media’s failure to disclose material facts was deceptive and violated the FTC Act, the FTC said. In addition, the agency charged that deceptive subject lines in Member Source Media’s spam e-mails violated the federal CAN-SPAM Act.

The settlement requires that Member Source Media clearly disclose in its ads and on its Web pages that consumers have to spend money or incur other obligations to qualify for a free product or service. The settlement also requires the company to provide a list of the obligations a consumer is likely to incur to qualify for their chosen item - such as applying for credit cards or purchasing products.

Judge Extends Microsoft Oversight for Two Years

A federal judge ruled on Tuesday to extend the U.S. government’s

antitrust oversight of Microsoft Corp for two more years, but stopped short of granting a five-year extension sought by states accusing the company of continuing monopolistic behavior.

District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly said she will extend the government's oversight of Microsoft until November 12, 2009, two years after its original expiration date, due to delays by Microsoft in filing technical documents to software licensees.

The consent decree settled the landmark U.S. antitrust case against Microsoft in 2002. The decree covers the company's ties to computer makers, how its software works with other types of software and enforcement to ensure it does not repeat past practices.

The consent decree's expiration had been temporarily pushed back until January 31 while Kollar-Kotelly considered the motion filed by 10 states to extend government oversight of Microsoft.

The states, which include California and New York, wanted the decree extended until 2012, arguing that Microsoft would again use its market dominance to crush competitors once the decree expired.

Kollar-Kotelly wrote in her opinion that the extension should not be seen as a "sanction" against Microsoft, but she said the delays in documentation meant the objectives of the settlement had not been fully achieved.

She also left open the possibility that the decree could be extended in the future and said there are mechanisms in place to reexamine the decree in the fall of 2009.

"We will continue to comply fully with the consent decree," Brad Smith, Microsoft's general counsel, said in a statement. "We built Windows Vista in compliance with these rules, and we will continue to adhere to the decree's requirements."

HP Gives New Life To Used Printer Cartridges

Hewlett-Packard is boosting its effort to effectively recycle used inkjet printer cartridges, Wednesday introducing a new process that manufactures new cartridges from recycled cartridges that are separated and rebuilt from scratch.

The "closed loop" process gives used HP inkjet cartridges a sustainable end-of-life value and puts the material back to good use while being environmentally friendly, HP representatives said.

The process first breaks down plastic in printer cartridges made of PET (polyethylene terephthalate), after which additives including fibers and resins are used to strengthen and regenerate the plastic. The remolded plastic is then used to manufacture new HP inkjet cartridges.

The plastics or cartridges are not melted, refilled, resold, or sent to a landfill, HP said. The process also applies to other products, like PET water bottles, HP representatives said.

The process, which went into pilot in 2005, has already resulted in HP

manufacturing 200 million printer cartridges, said Scott Canonico, manager of environmental policy and strategy for HP supplies. The process will go into full manufacturing now, he said.

Each inkjet cartridge contains 70 percent to 100 percent recycled material. Users will find the process beneficial as cartridges with new material perform better than used or refilled cartridges, Canonico said.

HP allows users to return inkjet cartridges worldwide for free in most cases through its recycling program , said Ken Fleming, marketing director of supplies for HP. In some cases, a postage-paid return envelope is provided by HP with the inkjet print cartridge box.

The process will apply only to HP cartridges, the company said. No external inkjet cartridge brand is being put through the new recycling process, Canonico said.

Before the implementation of the new process, not all plastic recovered went into making new cartridges, Canonico said. They were used by others to manufacture products including auto parts and toys.

The company has already recycled 1 billion pounds of hardware and hopes to recycle 2 billion pounds by 2010, Canonico said. HP offers recycling options for hardware including PCs, cell phones and computers.

The inkjet cartridge recycling initiative is the latest in HP’s broad effort to be environmentally friendly. HP recently announced that it would implement more energy-efficient technologies across its PC lines to reduce computer energy use by 25 percent in 2010.

Recycling is one way to go green, Canonico said. "We’re always looking to further our commitment to customers and our commitment to the public and environment," Canonico said.

While achieving the closed loop process was an achievement, HP will continue to look for new ways to better recycle products, Canonico said.

EBay Lowers Some Fees, Raises Others

EBay Inc. is rejiggering its fees - raising some, trimming others - to meet rising competition and maintain its share of the online auction market it helped start a decade ago.

But those who keep tabs on the Web site, including its top sellers, say the changes are a step in the wrong direction.

"It’s a too little too late," said Steve Grossberg, one of eBay’s top 100 sellers and the founder and president of the Internet Merchants Association.

Grossberg, a Florida-based vendor of video games, spoke by phone from a conference of 200 of North America’s top eBay sellers in Washington, D.C., where incoming CEO John Donahoe announced the fee changes Tuesday. EBay makes 80 percent of its revenue from the top 20 percent of its sellers.

"I think you are going to see a listing decrease, you are going to see

some sellers leave the site or pull back quite a bit and think of other ways to make revenue, and it’s going to backfire," Grossberg said.

Listings on eBay’s various sites in the fourth quarter rose 4 percent, reversing two straight quarters of declines, the company reported last week. The number of people actively using the site has stagnated, rising just 2 percent from a year ago, while revenues have risen modestly.

The price changes, which take effect Feb. 20, are complex. It will cost 25 percent less to list an item for auction and up to 50 percent less to offer something for a fixed price. EBay’s commission on items sold for fixed prices over $100 will also decline.

Its commissions on auction items selling for more than $1000 will remain at 1.5 percent, while its commission on cheaper items will rise as much as 67 percent.

Under the old rules, for example, a purse auctioned for $25 would have cost the seller $1.91, including 60 cents for listing the item plus eBay’s commission of $1.31. Under the new structure, the seller would pay $2.74, including 55 cents to list the item plus a higher commission of $2.19.

"EBay does sincerely want to compete. They are reacting to the competitive threat of Amazon," said Ina Steiner, editor of AuctionBytes.com, a trade publication for online sellers.

Amazon already has "cherry-picked" a lot of eBay’s high-volume sellers, Steiner said.

Company spokesman Usher Lieberman said the company’s internal pricing experiments and number-crunching show listings overall will rise in response to the changes.

"We’ve heard from our sellers for a long time that they’ve wanted us to reduce their upfront cost and risks, and we’ve done that," Lieberman said. Lieberman predicted the changes will results in savings for more than 60 percent of sellers.

EBay most wants to encourage growth in fixed-price sales, the area where it sees the most future growth.

One of its main rivals in fixed-price sales, Amazon.com Inc., charges no fee at all to list an item, though it charges a commission as high as 15 percent.

Sellers told The Associated Press that Amazon is more straightforward, takes less time and that they make more money using it, partly because Amazon pays for payment processing.

Randy Smythe, a former eBay seller in Southern California, said eBay’s sellers take more risks than Amazon’s because they have to pay before an item sells.

Smythe sold music and movies on eBay for nine years, bringing in up to $4.6 million a year. He stopped in 2006 because he saw increased competition from those who were gaming eBay’s fee structure, charging less for CDs upfront but more on shipping. He found he was keeping just 2 percent of his gross revenue, and he now blogs about the industry instead.

"What’s going to happen is it’s still going to be too expensive to sell on eBay and make good money," Smythe said.

Donahoe said eBay is at a crossroads. He told the sellers the new fee structure will be driven by their success.

"To maintain our leadership position in e-commerce, we can no longer afford to make incremental changes to meet our customers’ needs," Donahoe said. "We need to redo our play book and we need to redo it fast. We need to take bold actions to meet the expectations of buyers and sellers around the world."

Donahoe said a majority of sellers will see their prices fall.

But sellers said the changes will increase their costs.

"I don’t see any real incentive for the average seller to list more with this new fee structure. I think their ’bread and butter’ core auction listings will continue to diminish as a result," said Bill Hamilton, a Georgia-based top seller who specializes in collectible gemstones.

The new fees affect only sellers in the United States. More changes are coming in Britain and Germany.

The changes come as longtime Chief Executive Meg Whitman announced she would retire at the end of March. Donahoe, president of eBay Marketplaces, which encompasses its shopping sites and classifieds, has said he will aggressively change eBay’s product, customer approach and business model.

Martin Pyykkonen, an analyst with Global Crown Capital, said eBay’s rising fees have in the past caused sellers to look elsewhere on the Internet for places to practice the online skills they perfected at eBay, whether it’s their own Web sites, Amazon, or other shopping sites.

"The more savvy sellers look at a multitude of options. It’s not like Amazon is taking market share from eBay in a big chunk, it’s more of a gradual shift. This commission going up will be a telling point over the next months to see what kind of reactions it gets," Pyykkonen said.

EBay Adjusts Pricing To Encourage Low-cost Sellers

Online auction leader eBay Inc on Tuesday introduced price changes and tighter sales standards in a bid to retain quality sellers, improve customer service and revive flagging growth.

In a speech to eBay’s top store operators and market makers in Washington D.C., CEO-in-waiting John Donahoe will set out a plan to reward the company’s best sellers with sales incentives and priority ranking in search results for auction items.

Key changes involve lowering fees for listing items within auctions or for independently operated stores run on eBay. It also involves raising some of the fees sellers pay once sales transactions are successfully completed. And eBay plans to raise minimum standards to discourage abusive sales practices.

"Sellers that describe items accurately, ship on time, and ship at a fair price will enjoy preferential pricing and discounts on eBay," Donahoe said in prepared remarks. "We're serious about making eBay easier and safer to shop."

EBay is seeking to reverse slowing revenue growth in its marketplaces business, which is roughly half the level of three years ago. The company telegraphed that changes were in store last week when it reported its 2007 year-end results.

The moves initially take effect February 20 in the United States across both auction bidding and fixed price markets. In coming weeks, similar changes will be introduced in Germany and Britain, eBay's No. 2 and No. 3 markets. Eventually, the pricing and other rules changes will take effect worldwide.

In the United States, eBay plans to reduce insertion fees - the cost of listing new items - by 25 percent on most auction items and by 50 percent on most store items.

The fee changes, which vary by country, are intended to encourage sellers to list more items and use more pictures to illustrate listings, moves designed to encourage shopping.

Final value fees, or the price sellers pay for successfully completing a sales transaction, go down as the value of items go up. The pricing changes lower the up-front risk if listed items don't sell. "Put simply, we will make more of our money when sellers are successful," Donahoe said in a statement.

Long-serving eBay Chief Executive Meg Whitman said last week she planned to step aside at the end of March and be replaced by Donahoe.

There were 532,000 stores operated with the eBay network in the fourth quarter. The company no longer discloses the overall number of sellers who participate in its auctions business. But it boasts 1.3 million people make some part of their living selling goods or services on eBay sites globally.

Along with fee changes, eBay is making its minimum standards more stringent for anyone who sells on the site, primarily to discourage behavior like charging excessive shipping fees or not describing listed items accurately. Sellers with high customer dissatisfaction ratings will be given lower priority in searches consumers perform on eBay.

Analysts said the changes were welcome but that eBay has a lot more to do to revive its growth in its auction business.

"While the moves are bold, I don't think they are going to change the face of competition," Scot Wingo, chief executive of ChannelAdvisor, a sales consulting group that advises online merchants who sell through eBay and other sites.

But Wingo said eBay was headed in the right direction by cutting fees that have pushed some merchants off of eBay, reversing a pattern of fee increases seen in recent years.

Lower fees could help woo back sellers of books, music and videos - items that typically sell for under $25, he said.

"These guys have had a very tough time as (auction listing) prices and then store prices went up," Wingo said. "That drove a lot of selection off the site," he said, both to rival Amazon.com and to Web sites these merchants set up themselves.

Deutsche Bank analyst Jeetil Patel, one of two out of 27 analysts who recommend investors sell eBay shares, has argued eBay must drastically cut its sales commission structure in order to compete with Amazon, which will require "hitting the Reset button on (its) business model," he wrote last week.

"We think the structural issues may take years to overcome, given the economy, competition and financial impact," he said.

EBay’s Tweaks To Feedback Worry Sellers

EBay Inc. says it’s changing its user-feedback system to keep buyers from leaving, but the plan has sellers worried they’ll no longer be able to weed out untrustworthy shoppers.

Buyers and sellers have been able to rate each other at the online auctioneer since its birth in 1995, when eBay founder Pierre Omidyar envisioned a virtual marketplace built on trust among buyers and sellers.

Come Feb. 20, a full spectrum of feedback is welcome from buyers about sellers, while sellers can no longer give buyers negative star ratings.

The shift was announced Tuesday among a complex series of pricing changes and initiatives that eBay hopes will improve buyers’ experiences as it struggles with stagnant user numbers.

It’s a fundamental change to create trust and tackle fraud in a marketplace where buyers and sellers never lay eyes on one another. Steve Grossberg, a Florida-based top seller of video games and president of the Internet Merchants Association, said the ban on rating buyers is a good thing.

"When the seller leaves a negative feedback for a buyer, it drives them away from the site," Grossberg said.

But eBay needs to work harder to stop bidders who don’t pay up, he said. The site does not require immediate payment,and sellers complain they are just as exposed to fraud as buyers on eBay.

Company spokesman Usher Lieberman said about 6 percent of auctions end in nonpayment by the winning bidder.

Sellers can require payment upon checkout for fixed-price sales, which account for 40 percent of eBay’s business worldwide. But immediate payment is not required on auctions because the buyers are not at their computers when they win an auction, Lieberman said.

Sellers have long used feedback to alert one another about fraudulent practices like nonpayment. Sellers earn good ratings by delivering quality products and using timely and reasonably priced shipping methods. Buyers earn poor ratings by not paying for an item or threatening the

seller with a bad rating if they don’t lower the final auction price.

Both buyers and sellers use the information to assess their trading partners’ trustworthiness. Buyers can decide not to purchase from poorly rated sellers, and sellers can eject poorly rated buyers from an auction, for instance.

But sometimes sellers retaliate for poor ratings by giving a buyer a bad rating. Retaliatory ratings by sellers have risen fourfold in the past several years, Lieberman said.

And that’s turned off buyers, he said. Those who stop using the site complain more often about retaliatory ratings than other factors, such as not receiving items they’ve paid for.

Grossberg, the trade association leader, said eBay has no incentive to stop nonpaying bidders, because it charges its fees and commissions regardless of whether a transaction goes sour.

Sellers wrote this week in online forums that they worry what the change means for how they do business.

"Most of the sellers are having a gut wrench about the feedback changes. It’s a very abrupt change to something that has always been sacrosanct in the eBay world," Bill Hamilton, a top seller in Georgia who specializes in collectible gemstones, said in an e-mail to The Associated Press.

The company does not keep comprehensive fraud statistics since most fraud occurs outside of the site, when, for example, the customer uses a nonsecure payment method.

In the first quarter of 2006, eBay’s reported loss due to payments it made to settle fraud claims was .06 percent of revenue.

Study Shows eBay Buyers Save Billions

Buyers save billions of dollars each year bidding on eBay auctions, according to a new study that quantifies the benefits online consumers enjoy over and above what is derived by sellers, or eBay itself.

The independent research by two statisticians from the University of Maryland’s Robert H. Smith School of Business found buyers saved $7 billion that they might have otherwise been ready to pay in a study of eBay auction behavior in 2003.

Applying the same analysis to 2004 buyer data, consumers saved $8.4 billion, said Wolfgang Jank, one author of the study. A linear projection of the research findings would mean consumers saved around $19 billion during 2007, Jank said.

The study seeks to calculate what economists call "consumer surplus" - the difference between the top price buyers were ready to pay and what they actually ended up paying. E-commerce sites provide a treasure trove of data that allows researchers to test out theories of consumer behavior.

"Consumer surplus is usually very hard to measure," said study co-author

Galit Shmueli. "The problem is that it is hard to ascertain how much a winner or a bidder or a user would have been willing to pay for a certain item."

Jank and Shmueli are associate professors of decision and information technologies at the University of Maryland. They collaborated with Ravi Bapna, an associate professor at the Indian School of Business, who generated data for the study.

The study highlights the delicate balance eBay must strike between the interests of buyers and sellers on its site.

The flip side of the same data shows that sellers leave billions on the table that they might otherwise have charged buyers by setting higher prices.

While not the focus of their research, the benefit to sellers comes from the market liquidity of selling items through eBay, the world’s biggest online auction service.

At an annual conference for its sellers this week in Washington D.C., eBay is poised to introduce changes designed to make its auctions more appealing to sellers while also making it easier for consumers to find items they wish to buy.

The research examined consumer purchase data from more than 4,500 U.S. and European auctions in 2003. The $7 billion in projected savings across eBay amounts to about 30 percent of the $24 billion of total merchandise sold through eBay that year.

On eBay, winning bidders only pay the next increment above what the second highest bidder was willing to pay. The difference between each winning bid and what the buyer ends up paying amounts to consumer surplus.

EBay makes publicly available much of the aggregate data about bidding on its site. But it does not reveal data on the actual highest bids people enter in the eBay bidding system.

Instead the data was drawn from a Web venture Bapna was running at the time, called Cniper.com, which allows consumers to bid automatically in the closing minutes of auctions to help them win desired items at the lowest possible price. The statisticians adjusted their data to account for eBay bidders who place bids manually rather than via automated bids.

The group’s study of the 2003 buyer data will be published in a paper entitled, "Consumer Surplus in Online Auctions" in the Journal of Information Systems Research.

"You just can’t quantify this (consumer surplus) for traditional retailers - a store clerk would never get an accurate answer by asking a customer: ’How much were you really willing to pay for this item?"’ Shmueli said.

"We just pay the prices the retailers demand," she said.

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